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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002906

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: BLAIR VISIT TO ANKARA: MARKING A DEEPENING OF
UK-TURKEY TIES?

Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (U) Summary: During a brief but concentrated visit to Turkey May 17, UK PM Blair assured PM Erdogan and President Sezer the UK will back Turkey's EU bid and work to end the isolation of Turkish Cypriots. Blair and Erdogan agreed on a UK-initiated "Action Plan" to hold annual PM-level bilateral summits and enhance cooperation on a range of political, economic, and security issues. The plan includes an MOU on counter-terrorism. A British Embassy contact told us the visit reflects a growing awareness among British leaders of the importance of UK-Turkey relations. End Summary.

Turkey, UK Adopt Action Plan

2. (C) Ajay Sharma, head of the UK Embassy's Political Section, told us Blair's visit marks the start of a program to significantly upgrade UK-Turkey relations. More important than the substance of the discussions was the symbolism of the visit -- the first working visit by a British PM to Turkey in 16 years -- combined with the broad "Action Plan" adopted by both sides. The Turks understand the importance of Blair's decision to spend nine hours in flight for a six-hour visit in the midst of a tense political period in London, especially given that Blair will travel to Turkey in June to attend the NATO Summit.

3. (C) Blair and Erdogan approved a broad "Action Plan" that includes: UK support for Turkey's EU candidacy; UK efforts to end the isolation of Turkish Cypriots; and enhanced bilateral cooperation on defense, security, regional stability, environmental safety, macroeconomic stability, and cultural issues. The Plan includes an MOU on counter-terrorism, essentially an agreement to enhance cooperation between security agencies. It also includes an agreement to hold annual, bilateral summits at the PM level, making Turkey one of only a handful of countries to hold such summits with the UK. Sharma said the Plan, initiated by the UK, reflects a growing realization among British leaders of the need to "get closer to Turkey." On a broad range of issues important to the UK, from the British bases on Cyprus to the smuggling of drugs and people into Europe, Turkey plays a central role.

Blair: Further Efforts for EU Needed

4. (C) Sharma said Blair and Erdogan covered a broad range of issues in their bilateral meeting, with a special emphasis on Cyprus and the EU. Blair told Erdogan EU leaders are impressed by the reforms Turkey has adopted to meet the Copenhagen Criteria for EU membership. Still, Turkey needs to make further efforts in advance of the December EU Summit to deprive the EU's Turkey skeptics of excuses for refusing to set a date to begin accession talks with Turkey. For example, the GOT should find a way to release Leyla Zana and her co-defendants -- all of whom are Kurdish former MPs -- from prison while their conviction is under appeal. The GOT should also take new measures to protect the rights of non-Muslims in Turkey.

5. (C) In addition, Turkey needs to engage in a public relations effort to improve its image in Europe. This should include information about economic development in Turkey and the level of economic cooperation between Turkey and EU states, Blair reportedly said. Although economic issues are technically not among the criteria for starting accession talks, concerns about Turkey's economy weigh heavily on the minds of many in Europe. Kemal Eruygur, head of the MFA Western Europe Department, said Blair told GOT leaders he believes Germany will back Turkey at the December Summit.

Blair said French public opinion is against Turkey, but French President Chirac appears supportive. Blair also urged the GOT to focus on the EU Commission's Regular Report on Turkey, due for release September 29. Erdogan reportedly agreed with all of Blair's points. Sharma said Sezer, who held a shorter meeting with Blair, urged Blair to make every effort to ensure the EU in December sets a date to begin accession talks with Turkey. Sezer averred that a refusal by the EU to set a date would severely damage Turkey-EU relations.

Support, But No Specifics on Cyprus

15. (C) Our contacts told us Erdogan and Sezer both urged Blair to take the lead within the EU to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. Both privately and publicly, Blair agreed the EU must take steps to expand economic and trade cooperation with North Cyprus, though he did not offer any concrete proposals, according to Sharma and Eruygur.

Iraq, Afghanistan Discussed

16. (C) Sharma said Erdogan and Blair discussed the need to create stability in Iraq. Contrary to some Turkish press reports, Blair did not ask Erdogan whether Turkey could send troops to Iraq. Blair did, however, raise the issue of sending more Turkish troops to Afghanistan.
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